

# The Battle for Coco Solo

## Panama, 1989

Major Evan A. Huelfer

For several years preceding the U.S. intervention in 1989, Panamanian strongman General Manuel Noriega had subjected American citizens living in Panama to constant harassment. From early 1988 until May 1989, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) had attributed more than 1,000 instances of harassment to the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). After a string of serious incidents in May 1989, including the abduction and beating of an American sailor and Noriega's interference with Panama's presidential election, President George Bush took action. On May 11 he recalled Ambassador Arthur Davis and dispatched nearly 2,000 soldiers to Panama and warned that he "would not rule out further steps in the future."

The United States exercised its rapid deployment capabilities by rushing to Panama two light infantry battalions from Fort Ord, California, a mechanized infantry battalion from Fort Polk, Louisiana, and a Marine company from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. As the situation stabilized, battalions from Fort Ord's 7th Infantry Division began to rotate into Panama on three-month tours. Their mission was to protect American lives and property and to exercise freedom of movement rights under the Panama Canal treaties.

My battalion—4th Battalion, 17th Infantry—began its rotation to Panama on 29 October after an intensive train-up period. This pre-deployment training focused on civil-military operations, rules of engagement, and military operations on urban terrain (MOUT), and included numerous live-fire exercises. The high training tempo throughout 1989 would later yield huge dividends in combat.

Soon after our arrival in Panama, the four companies deployed to various points around the northern mouth of the canal. Company C settled in at Coco Solo, a small community to the east of Colon, Panama's second largest city. The company established operations in an abandoned wing of Cristobal High School, a satellite school for American students residing in the area. From this base, the unit conducted security patrols in the surrounding areas to assure American residents of their safety, show an American presence to the nearby PDF troops, and gather intelligence on their routines.

The greatest potential threat in this area stemmed from the 8th PDF Naval Infantry Company, located only about 200 meters away. Its boats sat moored in a dockyard behind the headquarters building, at about the same distance. For five weeks before Operation *Just Cause* began, the soldiers of Company C co-existed with their future adversary.

Following a botched attempt to topple Noriega's regime in October 1989, the new SOUTHCOM Commander, General Maxwell Thurman, developed OPLAN BLUE SPOON, a contingency plan to invade Panama and replace Noriega with democratically elected officials. Critical to BLUE SPOON's success was the neutralization of the PDF. Due to operational security precautions, the BLUE SPOON contingency plan was not briefed to 4th Battalion below platoon leader level. Still, with innovative and imaginative training, the junior leaders found ways to rehearse the mission without compromising security. Through visual observation, mental wargaming, and interactive discussions, all leaders became thoroughly familiar with the concept of the operation.

Company C had a solid group of officers at its helm. The commander, a 1984 West Point graduate, had just taken command in June. But in the six months before *Just Cause*, the company had spent most its time on deployments or out on training exercises that included live fires. The executive officer, who had prior enlisted experience in the Marine Corps, had been in Company C for two years, most of that time as a platoon leader, and his expertise kept the unit functioning smoothly. Company C had two of the most senior platoon leaders in the battalion. The 1st Platoon leader, a Norwich graduate, had been in the job for 18 months, and I had led 3d Platoon for more than 14 months. A newly minted West Point graduate who had just arrived in September led 2d Platoon. Despite his inexperience, however, he would lead the platoon into dangerous combat only three months after taking charge.

All five officers had successfully completed the challenging Ranger Course, which enhanced their tactical competence as well as their self-assurance. As a group, they had tremendous confidence in the ability of their men to accom-

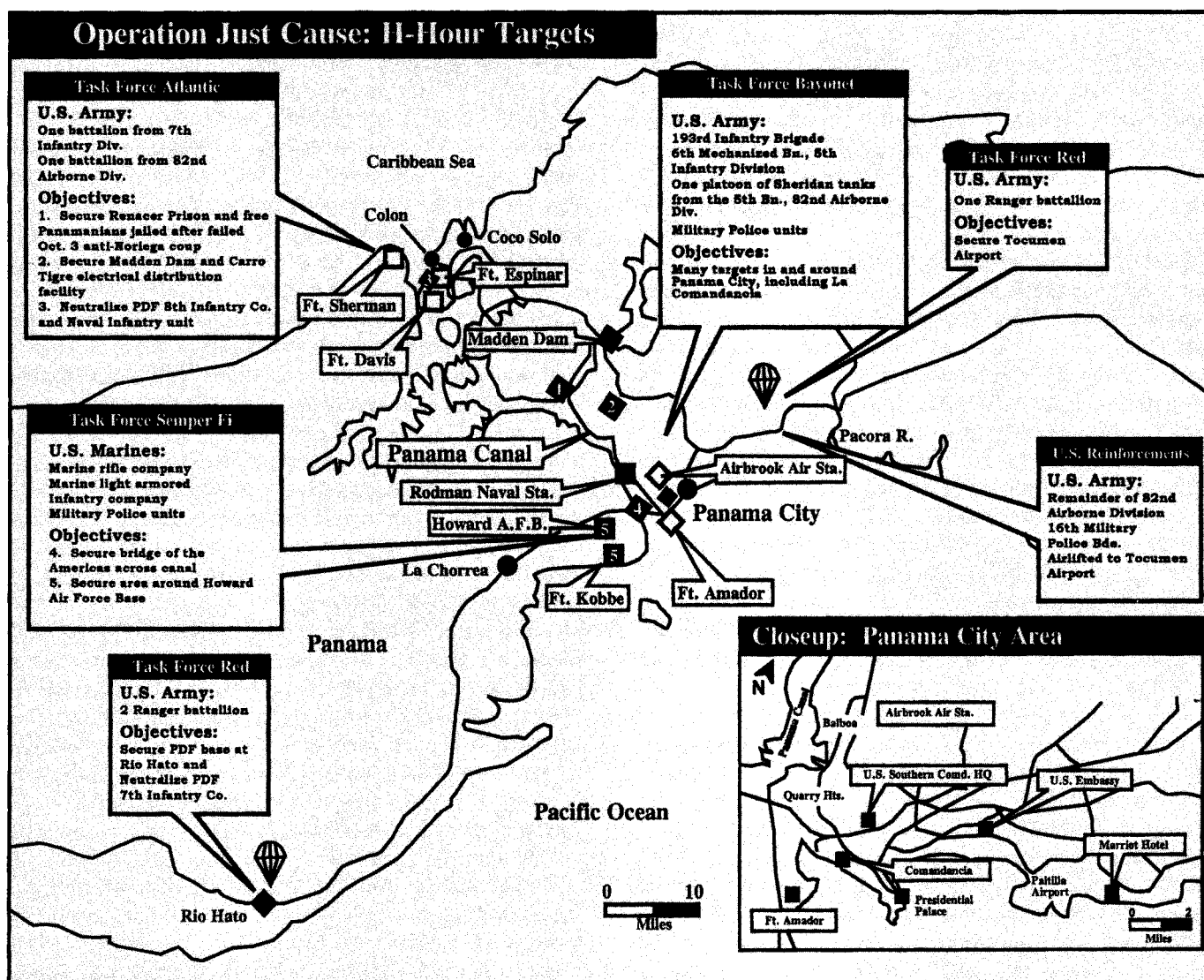
plish the most difficult missions. The company had succeeded time and again under strenuous training conditions, and its leaders felt that it would succeed in combat as well.

In mid-December, the company commander began to up the ante with the PDF. He directed more aggressive surveillance, including platoon-sized patrols provocatively close to the PDF headquarters. The platoons would establish a position in the Southern Housing Area, directly across from the PDF building, then continue with the patrol after a short time. On occasion, a 20mm Vulcan antiaircraft gun would be towed into position and pointed at the building to augment the infantry platoon's intimidating posture. At first, these demonstrations unsettled the PDF soldiers but after a while only served to lull them into a false sense of security.

The commanding officer of the 8th PDF Naval Infantry Company had assumed command of his unit only three days before *Just Cause*. Although the menacing presence of the Vulcan in front of his headquarters had alarmed him, other PDF officers had played down his fears. They told him not to worry—the Americans had been doing that every night for the past 15 to 20 days. This deception proved vitally successful once *Just Cause* commenced.

On 15 December Noriega installed himself as head of the Panamanian government, declared himself "Maximum Leader," and announced that Panama was in a "state of war" with the United States. The very next night, PDF soldiers shot and killed an American Marine at a roadblock. A Navy SEAL captain, innocently sitting with his wife in the next car, witnessed the murder. PDF soldiers on the scene detained this couple and hustled them off to a secure location, where they beat the officer and harassed his wife. They repeatedly kicked the officer in the head and groin and threatened him with death if he did not reveal details on his unit and assignment. Within hours of these two incidents, SOUTHCOM placed all units on alert. Company C deployed to its BLUE SPOON assault positions as specified, but after several hours of tense waiting, all units stood down and returned to normal operating procedures.

Back in the nation's capitol, top brass scrambled in preparing to brief the president. On 17 December, General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had recommended firm action in this case to Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. After two hours of consultations with his top advisors, President Bush was convinced that an invasion



was the right thing. The formal order issued the next day established H-hour for the invasion, at 0100 on 20 December. Elements of the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg and Ranger units from two locations in Georgia would parachute in at that precisely synchronized jump-off time.

After the killing of the Marine Corps officer, Company C resumed its routine schedule of patrolling at Coco Solo. No one knew that other units in the United States had been alerted for an invasion. On 19 December, the brigade tactical operations center notified our company commander to report for a briefing at 1830 hours; there, he learned for the first time that his soldiers would be going into combat that night.

He returned to Coco Solo two hours later and gathered the key leaders and said, "H-Hour is tonight at 0100 hours." The air was heavy with tension. My mind raced forward to all the things that had to be done in a few short hours.

At 2100 the company assembled in the hallway so the commander could brief all of the soldiers one last time. Everyone was nervous but confident that we would succeed. Company C retained the exact same mission as the BLUE SPOON contingency plan that we had rehearsed. After the commander finished his short talk, the soldiers returned to their platoon areas for final preparations. Earlier in the evening, before the commander had returned from brigade headquarters, the XO had taken the initiative and issued the company's combat load of ammunition. When XVIII Airborne Corps signal operating instructions arrived for the company, he assumed that something was out of the ordinary for that night's operation.

Since the platoons had less than two hours before departing, little time remained for issuing detailed operations orders. The platoons spent most of that precious time conducting backbriefs and final inspections; by then, every soldier in the company knew exactly what he had to do anyway. As I issued final instructions to my platoon, I made a conscious effort to exhibit confidence as we all prepared for our first taste of combat. But like everyone else, I waged a battle with my own personal fears.

The PDF at Coco Solo had successfully concealed both their strength and their intentions. Our battalion intelligence officer had estimated 100 to 115 soldiers in the naval infantry company, who were armed with a mixture of American-made and Soviet-made weapons. The heavy machineguns on the boats accounted for their most potent threat. Docked at the naval yard were two Vosper patrol craft with 20mm chain guns, two Swift ships with .50 caliber machineguns, two PT boats with one .50 caliber machinegun, and several other boats in dry dock. These heavy weapons, potentially the greatest threat, earned the most attention during planning.

The battalion commander stipulated five major concerns regarding operations at Coco Solo:

- He could not allow the boats to escape with their firepower intact.
- He had to protect U.S. citizens in the area.
- He had to minimize collateral damage to private property.
- He had to prevent small groups of armed PDF soldiers

from escaping the initial battle.

- He had to prevent the PDF from using their heavy machineguns to influence the battle.

Company C's mission was to neutralize the PDF company, and the commander had a variety of units at his disposal. Besides his organic assets of three rifle platoons, a 60mm mortar section, and an antitank section, he also had control over an attached platoon from the 82d Airborne Division, a platoon from the 549th Military Police Company, and two 20mm Vulcan antiaircraft guns from the 2d Battalion, 62d Air Defense Artillery.

With these resources, our company commander formulated a plan. The MP platoon would seal off access to Coco Solo by the main road to the east. Their vehicle-mounted M60 machineguns would provide ample firepower for the task. The 3d Platoon would block the PDF's possible escape to the south. The 1st Platoon would secure the PDF boats at the dock to prevent their escape to the west by water. The attached platoon from the 82d Airborne would provide suppressive fires from the Southern Housing Area directly across from the PDF building. One of the Vulcans would

---

***The 2d Platoon, the main effort, would enter the PDF building from the third floor of an adjacent building and clear it, top to bottom.***

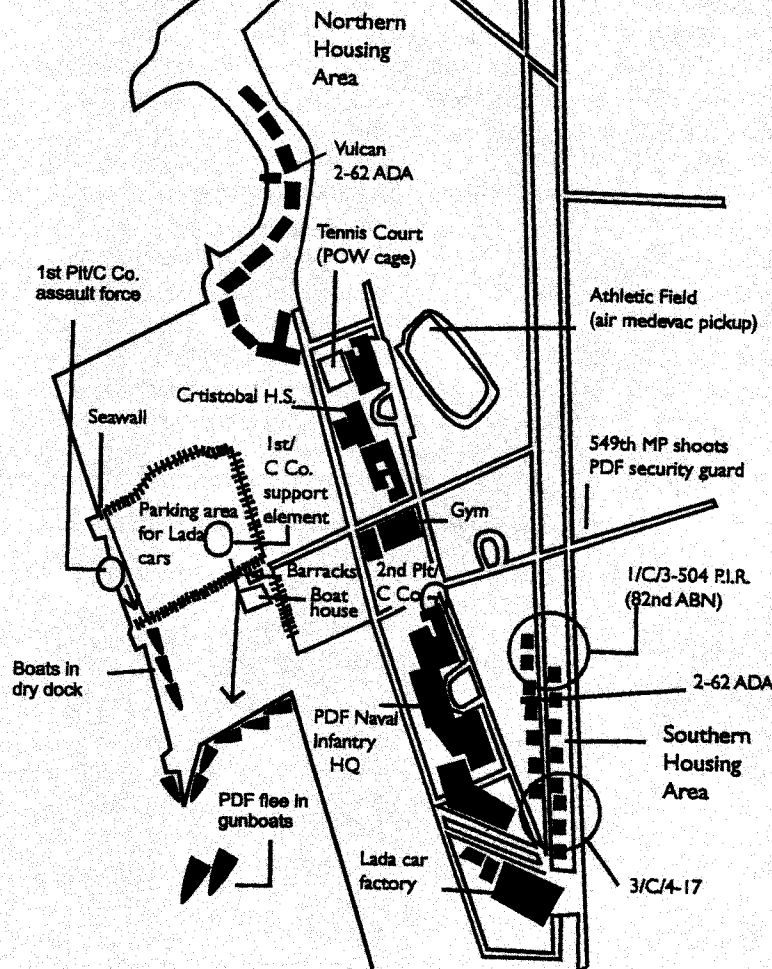
---

also be placed at this location to augment the fires. The 2d Platoon, the main effort, would enter the PDF building from the third floor of an adjacent building and clear it, top to bottom. The other Vulcan would be positioned along the water's edge in the Northern Housing Area to destroy any boats that tried to escape to the north out of the Manzanillo Bay. The mortar section would move to a position from which it could place indirect fire on the boats, if needed, and the antitank section personnel would be divided among the rifle platoons.

In case Company C needed additional fire support, an Air Force AC-130 Specter gunship was scheduled to be on station circling overhead and would be controlled by the company's fire support officer (FSO). Unfortunately, the AC-130 did not arrive on station when the company needed it. When it did arrive, it was too late to be useful. The company 60mm mortar section was also a key fire support asset, but the rules of engagement stipulated that indirect fires had to be approved by the brigade commander. Planners had implemented this control measure to limit collateral damage to the surrounding area.

As H-hour approached, soldiers went about their last-minute preparations. Each soldier carried a basic load of 210 rounds in seven magazines for his individual weapon, plus two or more hand grenades. Some carried additional rounds for the machineguns, demolition materials, or antitank rockets. Nobody seemed to mind toting extra firepower. Every soldier wore a protective vest and kevlar helmet and carried at least four quarts of water. Leaders also had night vision

## Manzanillo Bay



devices, binoculars, radios, and flashlights. Altogether, the typical combat load exceeded 50 pounds without even counting the rucksack. Aside from the physical preparation for combat, some had to ready themselves emotionally as well.

To ensure that the attack would not be compromised, elements tried to deploy to their assault positions as routinely as they had done on previous nights. Only three nights had passed since the last full-scale alert. At 2300, 3d Platoon began its infiltration, by squads, to the Southern Housing Area. As I departed with one of the squads into the tranquil darkness, I passed a man casually walking his dog. It struck me how peaceful it must have been to be ignorant of the impending action; he probably did not know that his community would be torn apart in a few short hours, and many innocent people would find themselves in a combat zone. This thought came to fruition for hundreds, including three teachers at the school where we lived, who were tragically killed at one of our battalion's roadblocks.

Once the entire platoon had assembled, the men began to

evacuate all occupants from their homes and consolidate them in the house farthest from the spot where the major action would be. Many of the evacuees were dependents whose spouses had already been alerted to deploy somewhere else as part of the BLUE SPOON contingency. The 1st Platoon began moving to its assault position at 2330 hours. The 2d Platoon assembled in the school's gymnasium at midnight.

Sometime around midnight, a U.S. counterintelligence unit intercepted a call to the PDF's Military Zone II headquarters in nearby Colon. The caller said, "The party's on for one o'clock. Get out of the area." Shortly before the shooting began at Coco Solo, the commander of the naval infantry company received a call from his immediate supervisor, a PDF lieutenant colonel, who told him to reinforce security around the complex because a U.S. operation "was about to go down." He recalled later that this was all he had been told; nobody had explained *what* was going to happen. He had expected repercussions for the killing of the American officer, but not a full-scale invasion of the entire country. Lacking further guidance, he ordered one platoon to defend against U.S. forces from their sand-bagged windows at the front of the building and another platoon to man the boats out at the dock. He envisioned their ultimate escape to Colon, two nautical miles away.

One incident at Coco Solo proved to be one of the most controversial and significant actions. At H-26, as platoons waited in their assault positions, the platoon sergeant for the MP platoon spotted several men in the woodline near his blocking position. He said that the men were using a radio to report American positions. He relayed this information to his platoon leader and later said he was ordered to "take that position and silence that radio at all costs." The battalion operations officer later refuted the story, saying, "He didn't have an order. He didn't have a mission to take anything down, simply to block."

The MP said that when he approached the group of men and demanded their surrender, one of the men jumped him, and in the ensuing scuffle, he shot the assailant point blank in the chest, killing him instantly. The other men he had spotted quickly came out of the woods and surrendered.

Because the rules of engagement in the operations order authorized deadly force against an armed enemy after 0030 hours, and the shooting occurred at 0034, his actions fell within legal parameters. Due to the unclear circumstances surrounding the incident, the case was later referred to the

Army's Criminal Investigation Command, but was dropped for lack of evidence.

However justified the MP's actions may have been legally, they certainly jeopardized the entire operation tactically. His decision to fire a weapon before getting clearance from the commander had serious ramifications. Along with the recently slain PDF soldier, surprise became the second casualty of the night. In a location where no shooting was expected, the sound of that single gunshot, combined with the rising tension, triggered an irreversible sequence of events. At H-26, synchronized or not, Operation *Just Cause* had begun for Company C. And for the most part, no one except the MP sergeant knew, at the time, what had happened.

Within minutes, PDF soldiers began scrambling out of the back of their building toward the boats. This may have coincided with the warning call to the PDF company commander to prepare defensively, but it was more than likely linked to the gunshot. The company XO sat in a sand-bagged bunker overwatching the street behind the PDF building. The bunker position protected two M60 machineguns and an M203 grenade launcher to seal off the escape route to the dock. But to his dismay, it was still long before H-Hour when the enemy fled in strength. He immediately radioed the company commander and requested permission to open fire. Some of the boats started their engines at this time, and it appeared that they were trying to escape before the trap could be closed.

The company commander notified battalion of the situation and asked permission to initiate early. Because of the relative proximity of the battalion's objectives, the gunfire would be heard at other locations. The battalion commander was concerned that his other companies might not yet be in place.

This contingency had been addressed during the planning process: The brigade commander had stated that early activity would not initiate H-Hour prematurely, especially since the operation depended upon the synchronized arrival of other units flying in from the United States. The battalion commander said that if the PDF escaped into the water with their firepower intact, it could spell disaster for other U.S. units in the vicinity. As a result, the brigade commander did not hesitate to approve the spontaneous request for early initiation. The battalion commander immediately relayed the message to Company C.

After a surrender request delivered by bullhorn to the PDF drew no response, the battalion commander ordered the Vulcan to commence firing on the building. The building shuddered as the initial barrage blasted the upper two floors and then worked its way down. The Vulcan spewed out approximately 1,100 rounds before jamming. Simultaneously, the attached platoon launched some 60 antitank rockets (a mixture of both AT4s and LAWs) at designated places on the building. The 3d Platoon opened fire on designated targets within its sector. With all weapons at Coco Solo erupting at once, the sound reached a deafening crescendo. The XO unleashed his two M60 machineguns on the PDF guard shack protecting the dock's entrance and sprayed any PDF soldiers still making their way to the boats. If he had been

able to fire earlier, he could have caused significantly more casualties. Due to the unexpected initiation time and the pause to get permission to engage, many PDF soldiers had already made it safely to the boats across the 200 meters of open area on the docks. From there, they would be in an excellent position to spoil 1st Platoon's mission of securing the boats, which should have been lightly defended.

The 1st Platoon infiltrated toward its objective from the north along a seawall and then divided into two elements as it approached the dock. The smaller support element, led by the platoon sergeant, was assigned to penetrate and destroy a small barracks and boat house on the dockyard and, from that location, support the assault element with suppressive fires. The larger assault element had almost moved into po-

---

***The smaller support element, led by the platoon sergeant, was assigned to penetrate and destroy a small barracks and boat house on the dockyard and, from that location, support the assault element with suppressive fires.***

---

sition when some of the running PDF soldiers spotted it and fired on it, from the hip, on the way to their boats. An intense exchange of gunfire opened up on the dockyard, probably even before the Vulcan had initiated its barrage in front of the PDF headquarters. A 1st Platoon gunner shot one PDF soldier in the head. Only his glasses and a large pool of blood remained after his comrades dragged him along onto a boat. As one of the boats made its way out into the water, a soldier fired upon it with his squad automatic weapon (SAW). But enemy fire converged on 1st Platoon's men from almost every boat moored at the dock, effectively pinning down those at the front of the assault element. The situation rapidly degenerated into confusion well before H-Hour.

The 2d Platoon had been staging in the gymnasium in preparation for an assault on the PDF headquarters building. The plan called for two quick firepower demonstrations by the Vulcan and a platoon firing antitank rockets to convince the PDF of the futility of resisting. If the PDF did not surrender, 2d Platoon would enter the building on the third floor and clear it from top to bottom. The Vulcan's initiation at 0043 was 17 minutes earlier than 2d Platoon had expected.

As antiaircraft, rocket, and small arms fire pummeled the PDF building, 2d Platoon readied to go into action. It first had to traverse an open area 75 meters wide between buildings. The leader of 1st Squad tossed a smoke grenade into the clearing to conceal his squad's movement. Before the smoke had thickened, 1st Squad dashed across the gap to the front side of a Chinese restaurant, an attached extension to the PDF building. The smoke grenade's initial flame silhouetted the moving soldiers against the night sky and immediately drew PDF fire upon them. Although no one was hit, the squad leader recalled tracers whistling by overhead and

churning up the grass between his legs as he ran. Once 1st Squad safely made the dash, the rest of 2d Platoon crossed the gap under the concealment of the billowing smoke.

No one showed more fire discipline than the platoon's point man, who was a street-wise soldier. With a finger nervously gripping the trigger of his M16, he burst through the door of the Chinese restaurant into the darkness beyond. The electricity in the entire structure had gone out with the initial barrage. Three or four people passed by to his immediate front, but he did not fire—they were civilians. While he fired his weapon many times in the subsequent two hours, he showed excellent judgment in not shooting in that split second. An error, even under tremendous duress, would easily have produced several casualties.

The 2d Platoon continued to grope its way through the building to the top floor. Without a diagram of the interior layout, they cautiously probed through the darkness, not knowing what to expect or precisely which way to go. Several wrong turns exacerbated their frustration as well as their anxiety, especially since the Vulcan still hammered away at the adjacent building and its tracer rounds could be seen streaming past the windows. The 2d Platoon gathered 17 civilians inside the building, including an old woman who had fainted when surprised by two camouflaged soldiers. Several males, fearing that they would be shot, had to be coaxed from their hiding places. The platoon's soldiers safely escorted all of these civilians out of harm's way.

With that time-consuming task completed, the platoon finally found the third floor door connecting to the PDF headquarters. The platoon leader paused to glance out the window. To the front, the Vulcan's red tracers pummeled the building with a thundering roar. To the rear, he could see 1st Platoon exchanging its red tracers with the PDF's green tracers in a vicious firefight. He was almost mesmerized watching when his radiotelephone operator (RTO) pulled him back down and admonished him to be more careful.

---

***Once on the PDF side of the door, the platoon leader detached his 3d Squad to fight the fire. Those soldiers never did rejoin the rest of the platoon in clearing the building.***

---

Once the preparatory fires had ceased, 2d Platoon received clearance to begin the assault. Only a locked door separated them from the PDF on the other side. One soldier placed a three-pound charge of C-4 explosives on the door with a time fuse. The blast jolted the door open but also sparked a huge fire. The room they occupied happened to be a garment shop, with loose cloth spread everywhere. Once the cloth ignited, the fire quickly expanded. Soldiers hurriedly tried to put it out so they could continue with their mission, expending 18 fire extinguishers in the process, but the fire soon raged out of control. The smoke from both the fire and the explosion combined to produce noxious fumes that made

some of the soldiers sick, including the platoon leader. The stench from the burnt cordite in the enclosed areas proved too strong for their knotted stomachs. Once on the PDF side of the door, the platoon leader detached his 3d Squad to fight the fire. Those soldiers never did rejoin the rest of the platoon in clearing the building. After the fire had consumed the room in which it began, they had to exit the building the same way they entered. Through this freak accident, 2d Platoon had lost a third of its firepower even before it began to confront the enemy at hand.

When the two lead squads entered the PDF side of the doorway, they did not know what to expect. To their amazement, the entire top floor housed an open basketball court, which meant the building probably measured about 100 feet by 60 feet. The 2d Platoon's remaining two squads moved directly to the stairwell at the front of the building. It went down to the left and right and met again at a foyer on the second floor with a similar stairwell from the second floor to the first. Composed mainly of concrete interior and cinder block exterior walls, the building also had an open elevator shaft along its back wall. The two lower floors contained a maze of rooms, offices, and partitioned sections.

As 2d Platoon began clearing the second floor, it became apparent that the PDF had gathered on the first floor. The two squads methodically proceeded room-to-room using two-man buddy teams: One tossed in a grenade and the other followed the blast with a burst of rifle fire. A later inspection revealed the tremendous damage a fragmentation grenade can cause in an enclosed room. The metallic casing explodes into thousands of tiny fragments, which splinter virtually every inch of wall, ceiling, and floor. A single fragmentation grenade causes horrific damage to humans caught unprotected within its blast radius.

The impenetrable darkness and high noise level created pandemonium inside the PDF headquarters as two platoon-sized elements battled for survival. The pitch black conditions rendered night vision devices inoperable, and the building's cement-like composition made the explosions even louder. To add to the chaos, American and Panamanian soldiers screamed in both English and Spanish. No matter where they were that night at Coco Solo, most soldiers in Company C would attest that it was the loudest night they had ever experienced.

When a group of 2d Platoon soldiers approached the elevator shaft on the second floor, a PDF soldier below yelled for the Americans to surrender because he had a weapon. A private first class ran toward the voice, yelling obscenities. His partner bowled a grenade by his feet and down the shaft and pulled him out of the way. They heard only groans after the explosion.

The platoon prepared to move down to the first floor. In the heat of combat, with the confusion and the language barrier, compounded by the darkness and thick smoke, it was impossible for members of 2d Platoon to ascertain the intentions of the PDF on the floor below them. (After Operation *Just Cause* had ended, the PDF naval company commander asserted that he had wanted to surrender all along.) At that decisive moment, 2d Platoon stood poised to descend the

stairwell to meet the enemy—a potentially fatal encounter for one of the parties. The PDF commander felt he had better surrender his men now or face certain death. He inched his way toward the stairwell and called up his desires to surrender.

The platoon leader later recalled the overwhelming confusion at that juncture. He had finally found the enemy, but could only get to them by going down the stairs and meeting them face-to-face. This realization heightened the platoon's sense of trepidation and anxiety. The element had not sustained any casualties yet, and the attack had regained momentum after its inauspicious beginning with the fire on the third floor. Now that the soldiers were this close to the enemy, the platoon leader could not afford to make any mistakes, especially since he had already lost one squad to fire-fighting duties. His mind reduced the options to a simple calculation—either kill or be killed.

The bantering between his soldiers and the PDF below was clearly audible, but neither he nor his lead squad leader spoke Spanish. He asked a soldier who did speak Spanish if he could understand what the PDF were saying. The soldier replied that all he could make out was “something about weapons and surrender,” but was unsure whether the PDF were saying that they had weapons and wanted 2d Platoon to surrender, or were willing to surrender themselves.

In the enclosed environs of urban combat, it can be deadly for a force to bunch up inside a building. Fearing that potential catastrophe, and reluctant to lose the momentum of his assault, the platoon leader ordered the squad leader to continue down the stairwell. When the squad leader paused and stated his uncertainties about the enemy's intentions, the platoon leader persisted and screamed, “Kill him!” in reference to the anonymous voice downstairs. The squad leader complied by tossing a grenade down the stairwell. The platoon leader later remembered that his order brought home the stark reality of combat.

The PDF naval infantry company commander later reported that the grenade injured three of his soldiers. He felt the grenade had been thrown intentionally despite his efforts to surrender. As 2d Platoon narrowed the gap between forces, its Spanish-speaking soldier finally maneuvered close enough to be able to understand the PDF soldiers. The PDF commander had continued his attempts to surrender, adding that he never heard the initial surrender requests made over the loudspeaker in front of his headquarters. The grenade caused injuries among the PDF and expedited the surrender process. More importantly, in accomplishing the company's most difficult mission, 2d Platoon did not suffer a single casualty.

The platoon leader and his soldiers proceeded cautiously down to the first floor. With his translator at his side assisting him, he ordered the PDF soldiers to crawl past him on all fours. The platoon's soldiers bound the prisoners in temporary flex-cuffs and escorted them to a holding area on the school's tennis courts. The 2d Platoon had taken 15 prisoners out of the building by 0209 hours and completely cleared it by 0241 hours. The platoon found a fully locked and loaded .50 caliber machinegun on the bottom floor pointing

out the window at the support-by-fire position; fortunately, this weapon had remained unmanned during the attack.

From the blocking position in the Southern Housing Area, soldiers from the 3d Platoon fired at targets in their sector during the opening moments of the attack. One of my M60 machineguns blasted away from the windowsill on the floor above my doorway position. The gunner's expended links clanked to the floor. As two entire platoons joined fires with the Vulcan, all firing from the Southern Housing Area, the noise level rose to a deafening roar. The buildings we fired from shuddered. Within 60 seconds, I ordered my platoon to cease fire.

I was sure there were no more targets in our sector by that time, and I was concerned about the many civilians in our

---

***The methodical clearing process by 2d Platoon ensured grenade explosions and bursts of rifle fire every few minutes for more than an hour, and at the time, of course, we did not know which side had been initiating these fires.***

---

area. It was very tempting for the individual soldier to continue firing because so much firing was still going on all around us, especially the Vulcan barely 100 meters to our right. It seemed like a live-fire exercise in some respects—it felt awkward *not* to be firing when everyone else was. But with many civilians still working in factories to our front, I had to ensure that my soldiers fired only at legitimate targets. Once I was confident that there were no more valid targets within our sector, it became a matter of waiting for the other two platoons to accomplish their missions and stand by for further instructions from the commander.

Sometime around 0200 hours, my 2d Squad reported seeing sporadic sniper fire coming from the Lada car factory on our left flank. Merely minutes before the opening shots, the security guard in front of that building, luckily for his sake, had left his post to go inside. A 2d Squad team leader asked for permission to engage and fired an AT4 rocket at the suspected sniper position. Because of the oblique angle from which it was fired, however, the rocket glanced off the concrete building and exploded across the street. But the sniper fire did stop after that.

At this particular point in the battle, I intently listened on the radio command net to learn the situation within the other platoon sectors. The Chinese restaurant burned in brilliant flames and soon spread over to the PDF side of the building. By morning, the fire had completely consumed the entire right side of the structure and collapsed the roof above the PDF headquarters portion down into the third floor. As we watched the fire blaze on, we hoped for the safety of 2d Platoon inside the building and 1st Platoon on the other side of it. The methodical clearing process by 2d Platoon ensured grenade explosions and bursts of rifle fire every few minutes for more than an hour, and at the time, of course, we did not



know which side had been initiating these fires. As 0200 approached, we were quite surprised to continue hearing persistent gunfire so long after H-Hour. Resistance had been much stiffer than expected.

About 0330 hours, 3d Platoon soldiers heard voices coming from the V-shaped factory building across the street to our front. A Spanish-speaking U.S. soldier maneuvered his way across the open area, dashing from tree to tree to get close enough to speak to those in the factory. He traversed directly in front of the location where the sniper fire was spotted earlier. After several minutes, he coaxed 11 frightened men out of the factory. They had been on the night shift when the H-Hour attack surprised them. After the power went out, several bullets had hit their building, including the AT4 that had caromed from across the street. They had immediately dropped to the floor and lain there in silence and darkness for several hours. The 3d Platoon soldiers searched and questioned the men and then evacuated them to the company holding area.

The company commander denied 3d Platoon's request to clear the rest of that building and the Lada car factory before daylight. At about 0800, 2d Squad assumed the mission of clearing those two buildings. Inside the Lada compound, enclosed by a cyclone fence, 2d Squad captured three PDF soldiers trying to hide. They had donned civilian shirts over their uniforms. Although one had a pistol, they quickly surrendered and were taken to the holding facility for further questioning. One of the captives, aged and portly looking in the daylight, appeared harmless, if not pathetic, for a soldier. But before I could generate any sympathy for his predicament, I reminded myself that, despite his humble physical appearance, he could easily have ended the life of one of my soldiers.

Meanwhile on the dock, 1st Platoon's support element had cleared its objectives after a brief firefight. They first had to penetrate a cyclone fence around a small barracks. Once in, they tossed hand grenades into the barracks but found it

---

***The AT section leader took a knee to aim, then fired. His rocket knocked over a mast on one of the boats, but the glare from the blast illuminated his exposed position, and PDF fire rained in on him from two different directions.***

---

empty. A soldier rolled a grenade under a truck, killing the two PDF soldiers hiding there. Two more PDF soldiers died when grenades thrown into the boathouse ignited a butane gas explosion.

The major firefight at Coco Solo erupted closer to the boats with the assault element. This development somewhat surprised the company commander because he had not foreseen that many PDF soldiers would safely reach the boats. Prior reconnaissance indicated that there would only be about six enemy personnel at the boats. The warning at

H-26 and the telephonic warning to the PDF commander drastically altered the force ratio. Doctrine suggests that an attacking force must have at least a three-to-one advantage if it is to succeed. At this point, 1st Platoon attacked at almost even numbers.

Another soldier, a former Marine, led the 21-man assault element forward. The element came under fire almost as soon as it made the corner around the seawall. At first, the volume of fire sputtered, but gradually increased as the element moved closer to the boats. Initially, the leader of the group could make out only enemy muzzle flashes from his vantage point at the front of the assault element. As he crept closer to the objective, he could distinguish actual enemy personnel. Although the attack occurred in the dead of night and in the open expanse of a boatyard, no one in 1st Platoon used AN/PVS-7s to enhance night vision capability.

The assault element soon found itself pinned down as the PDF soldiers on the boats gained fire superiority. The 1st Platoon leader ordered the lead group to fire antitank rockets to reduce the incoming fires. The leader of the assault element moved forward with one of his team leaders. The company's antitank section leader also moved up with another soldier to form two two-man firing teams. One team would fire LAW rockets while the other would cover with machinegun fire. After firing the rockets, they would switch roles. The AT section leader took a knee to aim, then fired. His rocket knocked over a mast on one of the boats, but the glare from the blast illuminated his exposed position, and PDF fire rained in on him from two different directions. At the height of the barrage, some 20 enemy soldiers fired on 1st Platoon.

The hail of gunfire hit both members of the AT team. Bullets ripped through the wrist and ankle of one, and an AK47 round struck the other, injuring his knee, upper leg, and hip. The two received aid to stop the bleeding and prevent shock. The platoon medic arrived to the front of the column within minutes to continue treating the injuries. But both soldiers had to remain in place until 1st Platoon could gain fire superiority to get them out.

Most of the assault element remained behind the cover of one of the boats in dry dock. Only the platoon leader, his RTO, the M60 machinegunner, and the four men with antitank rockets had ventured forward toward the boats. Now two in this small group had been hit—and worse, enemy fire had them pinned down. The seven ducked for cover behind a large pile of scrap metal heaped on the dockyard's pavement. They had moved only about ten yards beyond the safety of the boat in dry dock. Some 500 rounds blazed in above and around them. They could hear the rounds crack in the air overhead and see the enemy's green tracers pass by and between them. Even from my location on the other side of the PDF building some 500 meters away, it looked like a giant green and red popcorn-maker as tracers streaked back and forth across the night sky. The clatter of bullets pelting off the scrap metal pile must have been terrifying to the small group using it for cover.

The PDF had the 1st Platoon assault element well outgunned; they now had clustered in two covered positions.



Seven lay pinned behind the scrap pile and the other 14 remained standing up behind the boat in dry dock. To exacerbate their difficulties, they had lost communications with the commander. When the RTO took cover, the antenna on his PRC-77 radio came loose. It took nearly 15 minutes to re-establish communications with the company commander, still at his original position on the other side of the Coco Solo complex in the Southern Housing Area. In the meantime, the platoon leader relayed his situation to the commander through the XO, located between the two. When the platoon leader reported that he had been pinned down and taken casualties, the commander decided to dispatch the Vulcan from the Northern Housing Area to a position that could support 1st Platoon's movement.

The platoon leader realized that to gain fire superiority, he had to get his men out of the PDF's converging fires. They had to spread out, and this meant leaving the safety of a covered and concealed position. The young enlisted soldiers sought guidance, "We can't move. What do we do?" Several of the sergeants, demonstrating inspirational leadership, took the initiative and began to move forward. This provided the spark to get the platoon moving again. After the antitank section soldiers went down, 1st Platoon's responsibilities increased. Not only did they have to secure their objective, they now also had to evacuate their wounded buddies. The stark reality of their situation had dawned on them: "They will kill us unless we kill them first."

The role of cohesion and loyalty in combat cannot be overestimated. All of the lower ranking enlisted men and many of the junior sergeants in Company C had been part of a COHORT system. They had all gone to basic training together and then to the same first unit as a cohesive package. They had been in the Army together since day one, lived together, and trained together, some for as long as six years. Now tested in combat together, they relied upon their strong bonds to each other and a deep collective spirit to survive. They would go above and beyond the call of duty to save one another.

Sometime during the engagement, which kept 1st Platoon pinned down until well after 0200 hours, the second Vulcan moved to a new support position behind the high school building onto high ground that provided a commanding view of the dock area. This Vulcan began to shower rounds upon the PDF firing from the boats. Because of the platoon leader's radio problems, the assault element leader also had poor communications with him when they were not next to each other. As the element leader pressed forward, he found it difficult to entice more soldiers to come with him into more exposed positions and into withering enemy fire. Nevertheless, he sustained the attack on his own initiative. He fired the four antitank rockets (AT4s) that soldiers passed up to him to provide suppressive fires and enable the rest of the element to move. His rockets connected with a couple of boats, and he saw two soldiers fall.

The Vulcan added several hundred more large-caliber rounds to the melee, which definitely helped to tilt the fire superiority toward to the U.S. forces. The 1st Platoon could clearly observe the Vulcan's tracers streaking by them. With

the advantage in firepower, the assault element began moving forward again in earnest. With the Vulcan's tracers nearly passing over the heads of the platoon, definitely well within danger close range, the XO personally ran over to the Vulcan and ordered the crew to stop firing. The two M60 machineguns at his position had also shifted their fires onto the boats. Both guns added about 300 rounds each in support of the platoon. The additional firepower had all but silenced resistance on the docks and allowed 1st Platoon to close onto its objective.

The heroic efforts of the assault element leader encouraged the rest of the men to fire and maneuver. He earned the

---

***Once the platoon seized the first couple of boats to gain a foothold on the dock, the action ended quickly. The assault leader told a Spanish interpreter to inform the PDF they had 30 seconds to surrender.***

---

Bronze Star for valor as a result of his actions that night on the dock. The injuries suffered by the other two men caused them both to be medically discharged from the Army. The platoon leader received a grazing wound in the leg by a bullet, but did not notice it that night.

In retrospect, it is possible that the company 60mm mortars could have been used to place suppressive fires on the boats. Although the brigade commander retained the authority to allow indirect fires, the company commander could have employed mortars if 1st Platoon had been in grave danger. The mortar section sergeant expressed confidence that he could have safely hit the boats using the handheld, direct fire mode. The leader of the assault element also believed that 60mm mortar fire would have effectively suppressed the enemy fire coming from the boats. But the company commander and the platoon leader both felt that 1st Platoon had been too exposed in the open area to employ them safely. If absolutely necessary, the commander had planned for the platoon leader to adjust-in the rounds by first over-shooting into the bay, then gradually dropping the distance onto the targets.

Nevertheless, the assault element worked its way out of the temporary crisis. The combined firepower of the Vulcan and the support element provided the suppressive fire 1st Platoon needed to gain the upper hand. Once the platoon seized the first couple of boats to gain a foothold on the dock, the action ended quickly. The assault leader told a Spanish interpreter to inform the PDF they had 30 seconds to surrender. To the relief of 1st Platoon, 12 PDF soldiers came out and surrendered. The 1st Platoon took several hours to find and capture the remaining enemy soldiers who were attempting to hide in the water and in the vehicles of the nearby car factory. It took the longest time to thoroughly clear each of the boats. After the battle, 1st Platoon discovered that it had been opposed by about 25 enemy soldiers,

about four times as many as it had been told to expect.

While 1st Platoon was engaged on the dockyard, one of the Swift boats and one of the Vosper patrol craft escaped out into the bay. In the darkness and confusion, it was difficult to determine which boats, if any, had managed to escape. The first report of boat movement came at 0139 hours. This initial report confirmed that one boat had definitely made it out into the water, and possibly two. At 0146 hours, observers spotted two boats 200 meters to the east of the Colon monument. At 0341 hours, an AC-130 gunship neutralized one of the boats. No boats escaped north out of the Manzanillo Bay. Company C had completely secured Coco Solo by 0415 hours.

After the individual platoons secured their objectives, the company began to consolidate and reorganize. The trauma life support team attached to the company ensured that the wounded received immediate medical treatment. An aerial medevac, requested at 0312 hours, arrived at Coco Solo at 0402 hours. In addition to the two soldiers in Company C wounded by gunshots, two soldiers from the attached 82d Airborne platoon suffered backblast burns while firing anti-tank rockets from the prone position.

Although no one took an official "body count" of enemy soldiers at Coco Solo, rough estimates would account for about 15 total casualties—about 10 killed and five wounded—and perhaps a dozen or more killed on the two boats that made it out into the water. Despite the proximity of civilians living and working in the area, none were injured. The entire chain of command had emphasized that if civilians became casualties, "we might win the battle, but we would lose the war." Company C captured at least 30 enemy soldiers and detained 65 civilians that first night at Coco Solo. All civilians were released at noon the next day.

Many factors contributed to Company C's success at Coco Solo. The battalion intelligence officer emphasized the PDF's deficiencies. The naval infantry company commander had assumed command only a few days before the battle and did not have a thorough understanding of the forces arrayed against him or of U.S. firepower capabilities. This paucity in knowledge and his inability to know previous U.S. troop movement schedules probably contributed to Company C's ability to gain surprise in the attack. Although this was the first time in combat for every soldier in the unit, what they lacked in experience, they made up for in other areas. The battalion commander attributed the company's success to rehearsals, discipline, and good junior leadership. The company commander echoed these observations and pinpointed leadership, teamwork, and soldier training and

fire discipline as the keys to success.

Students of the military art can glean valuable insights from Company C's experience at Coco Solo. Paramount is the close parallel between combat and realistic training, which must be reinforced by detailed rehearsals. In stark contrast, the quality of training received by our World War II predecessors pales in comparison to that which today's soldiers receive. A platoon leader noted afterward that "everything you do in combat is taught in the officer's basic courses." With the numerous pre-deployment live-fire exercises, the squads and platoons had confidence in their ability to fire and maneuver with live ammunition.

Although the PDF had some very lethal weapon systems, they did not take advantage of their own firepower capabilities. In fact, during the battle, most of their heavy machine-guns remained in storage and were never mounted. The PDF soldiers were poorly trained, poorly led, and poorly motivated—a recipe for disaster.

Self-discipline is imperative in combat operations. On the modern battlefield, soldiers can expect to fight in close proximity to civilians. The United States will demand minimizing civilian casualties, fratricide among friendly forces, and collateral damage to personal property. To achieve these results, every soldier must understand and uphold the rules of engagement and the laws of warfare. Urban combat requires that soldiers exercise firepower restraint. Company C's soldiers exhibited tremendous fire discipline during many delicate situations, fraught with ambiguity, high risk, and uncertain outcomes.

Finally, a crucial factor in combat is leadership. Both inside the PDF headquarters building and outside on the dock, two forces of relatively equal size squared off. In both cases, the PDF wilted under mounting pressure. To emerge victorious, the two U.S. platoon leaders first had to overcome adversity. Leadership at all levels, from team leader through company commander, enabled the company to accomplish its mission. The company's experience at Coco Solo was merely a microcosm of *Just Cause's* overall complexity. The battle exemplified modern combat in the dynamic, technologically advanced environment of today's world.

---

**Major Evan A. Huelfer** led rifle and mortar platoons in the 7th Infantry Division. He also served in battalion and brigade staff officer positions, commanded the 1st Infantry Division's long-range surveillance detachment, and served on the faculty of the United States Military Academy. He is a 1987 graduate of the Academy, and holds master's and doctoral degrees from the University of North Carolina.

---

